Clarifying Roles in Decision-Making

One way to facilitate a strong sense of belonging and teamwork is to clearly identify the roles you are asking people/groups to play in decision-making.

There are four basic roles people or groups can play:

1. Receive information;

2. Provide input or responses to an idea or proposal, leaving the decision-making power in the hands of the person/people presenting;

3. Make all or part of the decision; be delegated decision-making power (usually within a set of parameters defined by the person or group doing the delegating); and,

4. Participate in a collaborative decision-making process (this could be fully collaborative, or it could include layers in which all groups have equal voice and layers in which final decision-making is assigned to one person or group).

When bringing an item or task to a given group (working group, team, board, committee, etc.), it is critical to communicate clearly about what role is being assigned/invited when presenting an item for discussion. Thinking you are being asked to play one role and then discovering later that you were being asked to play a different one creates confusion, frustration, and mistrust.

The roles requested should be reflected in whatever written materials are connected to the item or task – meeting agendas, minutes, memos, emails, etc. If you don’t know ahead of time what role you want a particular group to play in a process, make sure the decision-making about the role(s) happens early in the process, and is transparent and understood by all. It is far better to know at the beginning of a process whether there are disagreements about each person/group’s role in the process, so you can clear that up ahead of time rather than having the process questions get tangled up in the content conversations.